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ABSTRACT

There are three kinds of interdependent factors to be considered in the communication process: (1) characteristics, habits, psychophysical determinants, and expectations of the sender; (2) the same factors with regard to the receiver; and (3) situational factors, or the context, which may be different from the viewpoint of either the sender or the receiver. Communication partners have their own interaction competence based on cultural background and individual factors. Even the perception of the interaction is culturally-based. For example, in Finnish-German communication, the process is affected by differing attitudes toward: the various usages and connotations of time (in daily life, in the response time within the interaction itself, and in the organization of the discourse); verbalization of the obvious; nonverbal communication; the use of names; connotations of words and phrases; money; and the form and presentation of the discourse. It is part of the task of a language teacher to point out these cultural factors, because in cross-cultural communication there is always at least one person with the role of a foreigner. While no one can attain perfection in cross-cultural communication, efforts in this direction are always rewarded. (MSE)

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CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE AS PART OF LANGUAGE SKILLS IN CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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Communication like every human activity is constrained by individual and cultural factors. In fact we cannot know how the receiver has understood the sender's message in a communication process, but the idea of communication must involve a common understanding. Bearing in mind the fact that communication is not merely language (in a strict sense), we can better uncover the cultural constraints of communication ("Culture" is used here in a very wide sense as "the ways of a people").

Communication is a two-way-process and only successful when the receiver has understood what the sender intended. There is an intention, a message, which has to be transmitted to the receiver by the sender in a code system that is common to both actors in communication in order to influence the receiver in a particular way. Roughly speaking there are three kinds of factors to be considered in a communication process:

1. characteristics, habits, actual psycho-physical determinants, expectations etc. of the sender;

2. characteristics, habits, actual psycho-physical determinants, expectations etc. of the receiver; and

3. situational factors (context) (which may also be different from the respective viewpoints of the sender and the receiver).

Here I would like to underline the synergy and the interdependence of all factors in a communication process and also the importance of the receiver in the communication process. The receiver is not a block without reactions (even if in some cases the receiver may appear difficult, or unwilling to communicate or to be influenced; no reaction is also a reaction and will have an influence on the behaviour of the sender). In fact, communication is a dynamic process, not static, but a complex situation where everything matters.

Each communication partner has their own interaction competence (Oksaar 1984: 30-) in performing and interpreting verbal and non-verbal activities in an interaction situation. Initially familiar models of communication strategies are applied if there is no better alternative. We can therefore say that each partner in communication has their own combination of cultural background and individual factors when they enter a communication situation. Even perception and interpretation of the communication situation is a cultural matter and may thus differ significantly from the particular viewpoints of the communication partners. Awareness of the cultural constraints in communication is crucial in cross-cultural understanding. To

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improve communication, one should therefore consider the cultural ties involved in communication and utilize this knowledge as a partner in communication. In fact this consideration involves two things: firstly, an understanding of the behaviour and habits of the communication partner including an understanding of the communication partner's way of perceiving and interpreting the communication context; secondly, it is necessary to be ready to explain one's own behaviour, and habits and one's own way of perceiving and interpreting the communication context. Very often the latter point is forgotten. If we explain (whenever possible) why we behave and react in a particular way, explanations might clarify a situation and perhaps also make the matter (and ourselves) more interesting to the communication partner. In this connection, the amount of the information that has to be explicitly coded will vary from culture to culture. As we know from the HC/LC scale of Edward T. Hall (Hall 1977: 91-), a high-context (HC) communication or message is one in which most of information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, whilst very little is included in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message; a low-context (LC) communication is just the opposite, i.e. the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code. The different scale positions of the communication partners may lead to serious misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication if the partners are not aware of these differences, as, for example Stella Ting-Toomey (Ting-Toomey 1984) has shown for American ("low-context-culture") and Chinese/Japanese culture ("high-context-culture") at the World Congress of Applied Linguistics in Brussels in August 1984.

Let us now consider some of the characteristics of Finnish-German communication as examples of factors which we can study in order to find out something about the communication barriers in cross-cultural communication.

One of common parameters that varies from culture to culture is the time factor, the attitude to time. In my investigations (Widén 1983) I could distinguish similar differences between Finns and Germans as those found by Stella Ting-Toomey between American (LC) and Chinese/Japanese (HC) culture. There are gradual differences and different accentuations, but nevertheless these are differences that influence the whole communication process.

First, life seems to be more hectic in Germany than in Finland, time has become a kind of currency, "time is money". This attitude makes it possible for example for a person to be interrupted in a TV discussion if one second more time is needed for finishing a sentence than is provided for; time is more important than politeness (in fact under these circumstances the interruption is not regarded as impolite). In Finland this would only be allowed in a heated TV debate. This is not the best example because other factors may also play a role and influence the communication process and the communication behaviour, for example role, status, dominant behaviour in the interaction etc. (cf. Müllifman 1982, 141-144).

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A second example is time or the length of the reaction in a communication process. Here - generally speaking (neglecting regional and individual differences) - Germans seem to be quicker in response than Finns. "It takes too much time to get an answer from a Finn", is a comment that is very often heard from a German. In this instance it is not only the attitude to time that matters but also a difference of opinion about the answer. A German would like to hear immediately if the communication partner has understood the message, a Finn however would like to express a final response only, and he does not see the value of an immediate intermediate reaction as a confirmation, unless made aware of this as an aid to the communication process. A typical German reaction in a situation like this (with no immediate answer from the Finnish partner) would be for the German to make various suggestions, to "help" the communication partner. To the Finnish partner this could complicate the situation, the help may be misunderstood and the suggestions thought of as arrogance from the German side. And if mutual empathy does not suffice, the communication may suffer because of this interference. Empathy is also needed for other aspects of the situation; for example the slow reaction from a Finn must not make the German partner believe that the Finnish partner is dull just because of a slow reaction.

Attitude to time also influences the organization of the discourse. A German (and also an American) will tend to verbalize the whole process, including thinking, and will use at least reactive (if not active) comments when "listening aloud". A Finn on the other hand (and also a Japanese) will tend to verbalize the product of thinking only, assuming that the communication partner understands without saying that the silence is used for thinking. Such a discourse structure would more like a monologue. This is also typical of Turkish discourse habits, and this has caused difficulties between Turkish people and the Germans in Berlin e.g. (cf. Kuure, Kärkkäinen, Sipola, and Piirainen, 1984: 17; for American/Japanese comparison see Okabe 1983). We can see therefore that different attitudes to time can influence the discourse structure so that the whole communication process may suffer from this in cross-cultural communication.

A common attitude in Finland is: "A Finnish man neither speaks nor kisses". This means that a Finn is not used to verbalize or to show feelings, but on the other hand it also shows the attitude of a Finn towards verbalized communication: obvious things are not worth mentioning. The problem in this connection is naturally: what is obvious? A discrepancy between the particular expectations of the sender on the one hand and of the receiver on the other hand may here cause problems, not only interculturally but also intraculturally. Anyway, the old cultural habit that only important matters, real messages, are worth mentioning, are worth articulating, naturally also influences the form of Finnish communication: a typical Finnish discourse consists of statements only, questions occur relatively seldom. Furthermore, "small talk" is of little importance. So it is no wonder that it is sometimes difficult to maintain

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conversation in Finland. Other languages and other cultures may have the custom not to be quiet in company. This is an important matter to be noticed when teaching the language concerned in Finland. Without content - i.e. having something to say, a definite speaker intention - there can be no structure.

It is not only "speaking" that counts, but also "kissing", i.e. the various forms of non-verbal communication, which are also important in communication. The French can hardly talk without using gestures, a Finn uses body language very little. And this aspect is also a task for language teaching, if we want to teach communication in a particular language, not just words and grammar. In many cases these things are interrelated: the expressive structure of one language may need more contextual support than that of another language (cf. HC/LC-discussion above). The lack of "eye contact" of the Finns could be related to the fact that the Finnish language does not use paralinguistic means and prosodic features (intonation etc.) to any extent, so it is not necessary to follow mouth movements or the countenance of the communication partner. Under these circumstances it is possible that not looking at the partner may be regarded as polite behaviour. This is the case in Finland. Many foreigners wonder how Finns can manage not to look at anybody in lift that is chockfull; they do not understand that this is a kind of Finnish politeness. To the Finns, it would be an insolence to look at a stranger so obviously that he would notice it. It is not only the Finns who react in this way. For the English privacy is an important matter which is widely respected by other people ("An Englishman's home is his castle"); for the Japanese, whose everyday life including all chores is very public, feelings are private and they do not want to show them publicly.

But not only should the degree of non-verbal communication and its relative significance in comparison with verbal communication be considered, but also the importance of consistency between verbal and non-verbal communication. Otherwise there may be confusions in communication because of inconsistency, the receiver will not know what to believe (according to various investigations in such cases the receiver tends to believe the non-verbal rather than the verbal message).

Another example of the interrelation of language and culture is the use of names. In English mentioning of names has a very important role because of the existence of just one address pronoun "you", although in practice this is also a useful elliptical form when elements of uncertainty exist. In various cultures mentioning of the name of the communication partner is a demand of politeness. We do not say "Guten Tag" in German, but "Guten Tag, Frau Müller", we do not say "Bon jour" in French, but "Bon jour, madame/Bon jour, monsieur". In Finland mentioning of names in this fashion is not so common; Finns are perhaps more influenced by the past, more archaic. Among many primitive people, the mentioning of a person's name is an indication of some sort of power over the individual. This kind of false modesty in terms of not mentioning one's name

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or not asking the communication partner's name (which is not only a habit of the Finns) can naturally lead to misunderstandings or confusions in a communication situation. Only if the communication partner is used to asking the partner's name (as for example Germans), is there no harm to further communication. In many cases, communication problems can be avoided by cooperation of communication partners in a communication situation.

One of the most important things in cross-cultural communication is adequate presentation, argument, stating facts and reasons so that the communication partner can understand the message. In this connection we have to separate between content and structure, both of which vary from culture to culture. The goal of right presentation (argument) is to find some kind of "common language" for both communication partners. The "common language" is a very difficult area. Els Oksaar (Oksaar 1976) speaks of the social dimension of linguistic variation and of the linguistic dimension of social variation in this connection when describing interpersonal communication. The easiest aspect here - and even this is complex - are the connotations of words - those secondary meanings of words which in communication tend to become primary meanings. For example, the word "work" has a different meaning for those who have a job compared to those without a job. Also the attitude to work varies considerably from culture to culture. In an international comparison, the European Values Study Group found out recently that Finns, like other Protestant and partly Protestant nations, still regard work and the satisfaction derived from work as a central base for life and feelings - quite opposite to Catholic nations or countries like South Korea or Japan which were also represented in this investigation (cf. Lattl 1983). Current values in a culture can also influence the actual meanings of words and expressions. And so too can different life experiences and customs. For a German "sport" means mainly football, for a Finn (in summer) mainly athletics (excluding football fans, of course!).

An example of a larger argumentative content is the attitude to money. Expensiveness, or lack of money, are widely accepted refusing arguments in several cultures. In other cultures it is not polite to refer to anything which has to do with money. In Germany, a city guide will always remember to mention the cost of construction of an important building, something that always surprises a Finn. And the first question of the German visiting Turku Castle (which was destroyed during the war and then restored) is usually, what was the cost of the restoration. A Finn would never ask this sort of question because it would not be polite.

It is a part of the task of a language teacher to point out these things. It is important to know the life circumstances and the cultural background of a communication partner in order to be able to use facts and expressions that can be understood in the right way. Finns often know quite a lot about other countries and nations, and in many cases they assume (quite wrongly) that foreigners know as much about Finland. Usually foreigners do not know

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anything about Finland; Finland was never an important school subject, Finland has not played a large role in world history, and Finnish is not a worldwide language. A Finn must therefore give a great deal of basic facts about Finland in order to offer an adequate picture of Finnish circumstances.

Not only are the contents, the argumentative nature and kind of presentation, important, but so too is the form and order of presentation, the particular discourse pattern. We have discussed above the nature of discourse patterns and how they vary from culture to culture. International comparisons of student essays have shown how they also vary from culture to culture. Such essays have shown for example that Finnish school children can tell stories, describe things and events, but have difficulties with justifying claims, stating reasons and giving grounds for their opinions. This result seems to be connected with Finnish discourse characteristics which tend to use laconic statements only. At the AILA 84 World Congress, it was also interesting to hear that the best essays in a comparison of Finnish, British, American and German student essays seemed to follow a similar discussion order, whilst the essays with the lowest scores showed considerable cultural differences; in this group the Finnish and German essays seemed to form a group of their own, separate from the other essays (cf. Connor 1984). Under these circumstances, unless the composition of an essay in a foreign language is a special subject of foreign language teaching, I would not recommend a free essay form for language testing purposes. This is mainly because there are so many aspects to be considered, not just language structure (grammar) and vocabulary. It is a cultural matter whether one has something to say or not (see above: content) and if an individual has the creative ability to be able to put it into words (not everyone can do this even in the mother tongue!). And this cannot be done in a foreign language using familiar mother tongue strategies. It is not only pupils who have difficulties with the free essay form, but also teachers and those evaluating essays. Even the sense of humour varies, not only from culture to culture, but also in the various sections of a language community. If the command of the written form of a language has to be tested, there are many other more adequate forms of test procedures (guided writing, summaries etc.) which can be used instead.

As we have seen, everything that is said in a communication situation matters. This is something that we also know from the classic formula of Lasswell: Who says to whom, what, when, why, and with what effects? But there are also things that are not said that count. There are topics which cannot be discussed in certain cultures. For example a Finn prefers not to say anything about political or religious beliefs - these are matters which are considered to belong to everyone's private life in Finland. The opposite is true in a German, who, even unasked, likes to announce political opinions. This obvious need to discuss all possible things is not shared by a Finn. I do not know if the Fulbright professor who came to Finland in order to investigate the silent breaks in the talk of the Finns (who are famous for their taciturn nature and characteristics

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with words) has completed his work but the results might be very interesting from the cross-cultural point of view. This sort of silence should be put into a larger communicative framework, e.g. in terms of HC/LC-culture. I have noticed that several Finns are also unhappy about too long silent passages in company as well but cannot find anything to say because of inadequate communicative strategies. In some cases they use surrogate activities instead of talking such as sighing, smoking or (in an intimate company) yawning: so it is important to understand that a yawning Finn is not necessarily a bored Finn.

Above we have also mentioned several interaction determinants which can influence the communication process; things such as distance and dominance, status and role. People can have several roles in a communication situation. In cross-cultural communication there is always at least one person with the role of a foreigner. The fact of being the foreigner is not necessarily a barrier to communication (provided that there is sufficient command of a common language), the role of the foreigner can also be an advantage: in many cases a foreigner is not supposed to have a full command of language or culture. In Japan (Gühring 1988) a foreigner is not expected to have Japanese manners, whereas in Germany a foreigner with full command of German would be admired.

An adequate approach to cross-cultural communication always requires empathy and mutual cooperation. No one can master cross-cultural communication perfectly. Still, I am convinced that efforts in this direction will always be rewarded. It is not only a question of a particular communication situation, a happy end to business negotiations etc., but also of international understanding as a whole. Cultural knowledge as a part of language skills in cross-cultural communication is an important contribution to a better world-wide understanding.

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